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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HILL MEETS WITH MINORITY POLITICAL
LEADERS

REF: A. BAGHDAD 1539
[1](#)B. 2008 BAGHDAD 3506
[1](#)C. BAGHDAD 887

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) In their first meeting with Ambassador Hill, political representatives of Iraq's minority communities focused on the issues of emigration, greater political representation, and a perception of societal discrimination, subjects which they believed to be mutually reinforcing. They attributed worrying rates of minority emigration to Western countries to the lack of economic opportunity and political representation, not to anti-minority persecution, a point Christian religious leaders also made during their lunch with the Ambassador the previous day (ref A). There was broad agreement that minority quotas in the national elections and the creation of a second chamber of the Iraqi Parliament with mandated minority representation could help create the perception among minority communities that they are an integral part of Iraqi society despite a legal regime heavily weighted toward Islam. The Ambassador stressed the importance of finding practical ways to address minorities' social, political and economic issues. End summary.

Three Issues Emerge

[1](#)2. (SBU) On June 10, Ambassador Hill hosted a lunch for 10 political representatives of Iraq's minority communities: Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Selim (Chaldean), Minister of Industry Fawzi Hariri (Assyrian), Deputy Foreign Minister Labid Abbawi (Syriac), MPs Younadan Kanna (Assyrian), Amin Farhan (Yezidi), Sadaddin Ergec (Turkmen), and Hunein Qaddo (Shabak), advisor to the Prime Minister for Christian Affairs Georges Bakoos, and community representatives Matheel al-Sabti (Sabeen-Mandean) and Abdelrazzaq Abaychi (Bahai). The conversation was wide ranging, but three themes dominated: the issue of minority emigration, the need for institutional mechanisms to ensure greater minority political representation, and the belief of minority communities that they are suffering discrimination.

Emigration

[1](#)3. (SBU) The minority political leaders agreed that the emigration of their communities was their most pressing concern, although it was notable that the issue of security played a minor role in the conversation. Minister Hariri said that in general minorities had fared very badly since 2003 and that their departure was due to a combination of political, economic and security factors. Hariri said the Prime Minister and the government were very conscious of minority issues and were willing to do more to stem

emigration, but that the Parliament had not passed any legislation that would give them the financial tools to do so. In contrast, MP Kanna put the blame on liberal immigration policies in the United States and Europe, which he claimed were "vacuuming up" all of the minorities from Iraq. Poloff noted that most minority emigration had been to Western Europe, not the U.S. Kanna noted that in order for minorities to stay in Iraq they needed not only security, but jobs as well. Deputy FM Abbawi added that minorities also needed "political acceptance." The Ambassador told the political leaders that the "pull factor" of the economic opportunities in the West was a challenge in other countries as well, and said he was pleased to hear that the "push factor" of persecution was no longer a driver of minority emigration. (Note: The conversation on emigration mirrored almost exactly the Ambassador's discussion with Christian religious leaders on June 9 (Ref A). End note.)

Political Representation
QPolitical Representation

14. (SBU) The minority leaders focused on two political themes: guaranteed quotas for minorities in the upcoming national elections and the creation through the ongoing Constitutional amendment process of a second chamber to the Iraqi Parliament with mandated minority representation. With respect to election quotas, MPs Kanna and Qaddo noted that the drafting of an elections law has not yet begun and that there was disagreement on whether there should open or closed lists and whether the electoral system should be a single national district or 18 governorate districts, as it was in

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the 2005 parliamentary elections. However, Deputy FM Abbawi noted that the quota issue was a big concern for minority communities and argued that the six seats reserved for minorities during the January 2009 provincial elections were insufficient and sent a signal to minorities that they were unimportant. Abbawi said he believed that now was an optimal time to give minorities greater representation. Sectarian tensions are at a low point, he said, and such a move would send a positive signal to minority communities. Minister Hariri seconded this notion, arguing the single biggest setback for minorities was the Parliament's Article 50 vote (ref B) that gave Christians a single seat in the provincial councils of Baghdad, Basra and Ninawah. Hariri contended it would have been better to get no quotas rather than be given such a token gesture. MP Kanna recounted that Arab-Kurd tensions -- coupled with fears about creating an unbalanced provincial council -- sidetracked a plan for minorities to be given seven reserved seats in the Ninawah Provincial Council.

15. (SBU) The Ambassador asked the minority leaders about the prospects of adding a second, upper chamber to the Iraqi Parliament that might function more like the U.S. Senate with minority groups exercising greater political power relative to their demographic size. Deputy FM Abbawi said that the creation of a second chamber was important as it would have the ability to give recommendations even if it had no power to initiate legislation. MP Qaddo agreed that a second chamber was desirable, but complained that no one had any idea what the Constitutional Review Committee was doing and therefore could not comment on any specific proposal. (Note: The Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) has been working for the past several years to draft a package of constitutional amendments (ref C). One of these will establish an upper house, the Federation Council. The CRC plans to submit its final report to Parliament soon. Septel will report on this effort and the proposed amendments. End note.)

Kirkuk

16. (SBU) As part of the discussion of elections and political representation, the minority leaders also discussed the issue of Kirkuk. MP Kanna, who represents the Christian community on parliament's seven-member "Article 23" Committee which is tasked with providing recommendations on how to resolve the issue of Kirkuk, stated that the Committee had not met its June 1 deadline of submitting recommendations to Parliament. Although its mandate had been extended, the Committee had suffered a total breakdown and no consensus recommendations were likely to be submitted, he asserted. The Ambassador asked how this might affect how the national elections take place in Kirkuk. Minister Hariri stated that the Cabinet had approved an Article 140 Commission decision in which new residents in the city of Kirkuk would be allowed to remain in the city, but would not be able to vote there -- this they could do in their place of origin. Poloff acknowledged the thorny political dimensions of the Kirkuk issue, but noted that this electoral modality, by which certain residents were allowed to choose their provincial government and others not, could be seen as inconsistent with majoritarian democratic norms.

17. (SBU) Hariri stressed that quotas were essential for the Kirkuk Provincial Council in order to move the process forward. MP Kanna said the 32-32-32-4 principle was still in play (whereby the Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen each have 32% of the seats on the provincial council with Christians taking the remaining 4%). The Prime Minister's advisor for Christian Affairs, Georges Bakoos, maintained that there was insufficient political support for that idea. The Ambassador noted that in the U.S., Congressional districts are redrawn every 10 years based on census results, a process that generally ensures that migration is factored into political representation.

Discrimination

18. (SBU) The minority leaders also discussed what they viewed as examples of discrimination toward their communities. At the top of the list was the complaint that a Saddam-era law that requires the conversion of minor children to Islam in the event that one of their parents should convert remains on the books. MP Kanna claimed he knew of 2,000 cases in which minor children had had their religion changed to Muslim and now could not change it back to Christianity. Minister Hariri said that there were at least 10,000 such cases. Minister of Human Rights Selim told the

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Ambassador that she had raised this issue, not for the first time, in a letter to the Judicial Council, but had been rebuffed. She said she planned to continue to press the issue. Selim warned that Iraq was moving toward being an exclusively Islamic country, pointing out that while parliament decided to remove Baathist symbols from the Iraqi flag, Muslim religious conservatives have prevented the removal of the words "God is Great." Georges Bakoos pointed to a recent debate in Parliament over whether to ban alcohol in Iraq as further evidence of cultural discrimination. Several MPs also raised the contradictions inherent in the Constitution's Article 2, which says no law shall violate the principles of Islam and also that no law shall violate the principles of democracy and the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in the Constitution. The MPs also noted that some religious and ethnic minorities, including Shabaks and Bahais, are not identified by name as "official" minorities in the Constitution.

19. (SBU) Acknowledging the importance of minority rights and identity, the Ambassador noted that the U.S. government also sometimes uses religious symbols (e.g., on our currency), and that the Iraqi government's use of

Muslim-majority religious symbols and messages such as "God is Great" on the flag is not inherently anti-minority. He said that Iraq is not alone in trying to balance tradition and maintaining national identity with the civil requirements of democracy. This is a conversation many countries are having.

¶10. (SBU) The minority leaders were also critical of Iraq's continuous focus on the trilateral relations between Sunnis, Shias and Kurds to the exclusion of minorities. Minister Hariri said that the larger ethnic groups always treated any job given to a minority as a favor done to the group rather than being based on merit. Minister Selim told the Ambassador that minorities had been excluded from the recent creation of a de-Baathification Committee because they "had not suffered during the reign of Saddam." They missed the point, she said: a body set up to foster national reconciliation must be representative of the entire country. Hariri also quickly pointed out that the assertion that minorities had not suffered under Saddam was also wrong: "We all suffered." Abbawi said that there needed to be a shift in focus from the Sunni-Shia-Kurd paradigm. "Iraq is a rectangle, not a triangle," he said. The Ambassador agreed that the Iraqi political landscape was much more complex than Shia-Sunni-Kurd. He stressed the need for Iraqis now to transcend sectarian orientations and focus instead on creating a multi-cultural, civic Iraqi identity.

¶11. (SBU) Both of the MPs representing the Yezidis and the Turkmen complained to the Ambassador that their communities had been the victims of human rights abuses since 2003 from the Kurds, who had entered their traditional areas. Yezidi MP Farhan argued for an autonomous region in the north where minorities could govern themselves and protect themselves with their own security forces. Both MPs along with Shabak MP Qaddo were concerned about the national census scheduled in October, claiming that their communities could be put under pressure to declare themselves to belong to a different ethnic or religious group than they really were. (Note: Many Kurds insist that Shabaks are Kurds. End note.) The Bahai representative, Abdelrazzaq Abaychi, explained that Bahais are currently registered as Muslim on their national ID cards and requested the Ambassador's support in helping QID cards and requested the Ambassador's support in helping the Bahai community's efforts to implement an MOI directive that allows them to change "Muslim" to "Bahai." He said the MOI directive is not being implemented because the legal advisor in the Directorate of Nationality and Passports has determined that such a change is tantamount to the holders' changing their religion from Muslim to Bahai, and it is illegal to convert from Islam to another religion. The Ambassador noted that we have raised this issue at the Ministry of Interior and would do so again. He also noted that while this was his first meeting with minority political representatives, it was by no means his last. This was a conversation that will continue.

Christian Conference

¶12. (SBU) Minister Hariri told the Ambassador that the Prime Minister was interested in holding a conference in Baghdad to review the status of Christians and other minorities in Iraq. He said that the idea was still in its infancy, but that there was a lot of concern in the minority community about whether such a conference would be effective in generating momentum to address minority concerns. The Ambassador emphasized that the timing of such a conference would need to

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be calibrated to ensure effective political follow-up. Poloff suggested that such a conference would be most effective if it were preceded by several months of minority collaboration to hammer out a common political agenda and concrete steps the government could take to advance their

interests. The conference could then be used to spotlight and catalyze government action on this minority action plan.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) The minority political leaders' strong concern about their diminishing numbers due to emigration to the West, and their laying the blame for this on liberal Western emigration rules and greater economic opportunity in Europe and the U.S. -- but not, significantly, on persecution -- is consistent with what we've been hearing from other minority contacts, both in Baghdad and the KRG. We will continue to urge our minority contacts to put aside their differences and work together to develop a political action plan that advances issues of common concern. The Christian conference was originally proposed in the summer of 2008. Despite our follow up with Selim, Abbawi, and Hariri last year, the conference idea lost momentum. We are encouraged that Hariri raised it with the Ambassador. We will again follow up.
HILL